

## Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 17

### Navigating Major Life Stressors

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

“In eleventh grade, he was severely abused by an older boy in the yeshiva, and now, a few years later, he is having a crisis of identity.”



That was the crux of the email that I received recently from a friend of mine. It's a really bad case, and he wanted to know what I think could be done to help the victim (who was made to believe that he was a willing party to the abuse).

Now, this subject really belongs to my other newsletter (מוגנות והמסתעף), but there is a point here that is exceedingly relevant to this forum; and that is one of the main questions that my friend asked.

Should the victim be encouraged to tell his parents what happened?

My response to that was as follows: Regarding telling his parents, I think it really depends. If they are the type that, in the long run, will be understanding, able to deal with it, and supportive, then, yes, I do believe that it is important that they should be on board because he needs all the support he can get. But if his parents are the type that they may (inadvertently) re-traumatize him by their response or lack

thereof, then it makes sense to me that, since he is now an adult, he should look to others for support and not do something that would most likely just cause him more angst and suffering.

That brings us to the point which is relevant to shalom bayis: navigating major life stressors. It's a crucial topic as practically every couple on planet Earth is bound to be faced with major life stressors at one point or another. In all likelihood, most couples will have to face not one, but multiple major life stressors over the course of their shared lives.

And things like that have a tendency to shake people up; on the individual as well as shared-relationship level. Discovering that one's child has been sexually abused is an example of this. A parent, sometimes both, may feel completely overwhelmed by such a revelation. For many people, it's "every parent's worst nightmare". It can cause a real system overload. Having a kit – prepared in advance - of "disaster mitigation tools" can be extremely helpful.

Think of it like fire preparedness. A family that has a fire extinguisher, escape ladder, and a specific plan of what to do in case of fire, is way more likely to emerge from a fire with resilience – on both the physical as well as psychological level – than a family that has no fire preparedness.

The topic of preparedness and resilience building is a broad one that could easily fill several volumes, but I'd like to share a few brief ideas that I think can be helpful to think about and implement during life's inevitable storms.

- It's ok to feel overwhelmed and in need of outside help. There is no shame in reaching out for support, whether moral or material. A very popular coach

here in Eretz Yisrael once made a point to emphasize to his considerable following that he himself makes sure to have therapy sessions when he goes through something significantly troubling as he does not want to carry that baggage around with him. Not everyone can afford private therapy, but there are a number of subsidized and even free options available today, and there is also a considerable amount of help that can be had through hotlines and internet websites that cater to our community.

- Major stressors (and even minor stressors) can have an almost sadistic way of pitting people against each other. When something serious is bothering you, it can tend to bring to the surface lots of grievances over relatively minor and benign annoyances that, during the good times, are easily overlooked. To successfully navigate storms, it is super important to remind yourself that “we are in this together”. It’s not just out of a sense of responsibility to the marriage and/or family unit, but it is genuinely in the best interest of each individual spouse to keep up the teamwork attitude. United we stand, divided we fall.
- Work on being ok with being vulnerable. Emotions tend to run awfully deep and sharing them with others, even one’s spouse, can be difficult. Sometimes even really difficult (perhaps more often for men than for women). But carrying that burden alone can be really tough and the sense of shared strength and togetherness that is engendered by sharing one’s innermost secret feelings can be huge.
- To foster being ok with exposing vulnerabilities, it is crucial to respect your spouse’s deep secrets, whatever they may be. Sometimes your spouse may share a feeling or experience and it may seem trivial. It is crucial to remember, though, that feelings are not particularly discerning. So, for example, if a husband

tell his wife that he once felt annoyed when six weeks went by without him getting an aliyah in shul, or a wife tells her husband that she felt hurt that her aunt bought dresses for her sister's kids for the cousin's chasuna but not for your kids, it may be that your spouse just opened up an extremely private matter to you. Don't be dismissive. Be respectful and validating.

- Another huge part of this respect for sharing is to never allow that sharing to ever come back to bite your spouse. For example, referencing back to that illustration of a husband sharing how he didn't get an aliyah for six weeks, imagine that one Shabbos he says in an annoyed tone of voice, "Unbelievable, there is a fish fork set at every spot at the table except for mine!" It's no fun hearing something like that over an innocent oversight, and a wife may be inclined to rejoinder, "Don't worry, it won't happen six weeks in a row." That is a huge no-no. That would be an egregious betrayal of confidence, and it could trigger him to close up and never want to share anything private about himself for a long, long time to come. (And, obviously, the same thing goes in the other direction from husband to wife).
- In the specific context of dealing with a major life stressor such as discovering that one's child was sexually abused, embracing vulnerability means allowing yourself to voice your feelings and fears, whatever they may be. To be ok with expressing and sharing things like, "I feel so overwhelmed. Devastated. Ashen. Like the world is collapsing." And so on and so forth. In Megillas Eichah, Yirmiyahu HaNavi gives vent to all of his incredibly tumultuous painful feelings of despair before encouraging himself with hopeful bitachon, so we can also do that too.

- As much as possible, don't allow the major life stressor to take over your entire life. As incredibly searing, painful, and awful as it may be, life must go on. This is such a crucial point. It is so critically important that the major life stressor not be allowed to act as a whirlpool that sucks your entire being down into the abyss. That means maintaining one's day to day routine as much as possible. Continuing to give attention to all of one's children to whatever extent possible. Keeping up with work as much as possible. And so and so forth.
- Regular exercise and hobbies can be excellent tools for stress management. It can feel cruel to spend time on seemingly trivial things like daily routines, work, exercise, and hobbies when there is a major life disaster at hand, but here is a truism: if one allows oneself to be sucked down into the abyss and consumed by it, there will be nothing left of him to help anyone else. Your life is important for both you as well as whomever it may be that you feel you need to help or be there for.
- Diet, as well, is very important. Things like making sure you are not suffering from terrible glucose spikes or lack of magnesium, vitamin D, or vitamin B12 (to name a few) can be very important to maintaining physical healthy and stamina and emotional equilibrium.
- And, of course, vitamin S (sleep) is crucial. It can be very, very difficult to sleep well when struggling with a major life stressor, but sticking to a fixed bedtime as much as possible – coupled with regular exercise and good nutrition – can go a long way to keeping vitamin S at the levels that it needs to be at (for most people that's seven hours at minimum). And, if absolutely necessary, one can ask one's physician about using sleeping pills.

No self-help list is complete without teffilah. And as my rebbi, Rav Moshe Twersky Hy”d said, don’t limit teffilah to the three times a day that we engage in it formally; but see to it that you talk to Hashem. In your own words. In your own language. Tell him how it feels. Tell him what you need. Tell him that it’s not just a want but a real, genuine need. *Rachmana liba baei*. Hashem wants your heart.

Whether it is exulting in joy or bleeding with pain, Hashem wants your heart.

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